

I-155 becomes political football

By Mike Dennison - IR State Bureau - 02/22/09

In the wake of his move to delay funding to expand a popular children's health-insurance program, state Sen. Dave Lewis of Helena is getting plenty of mail these days — and it's not complimentary.

"I got one e-mail from someone who thinks I did the right thing," he said Saturday. "The other 700 who e-mailed me think I'm an idiot."

So why would Lewis and his fellow Republicans set themselves up for this litany of public abuse? Only they can say for sure, but regardless of the reasons, last week's vote on money for the Healthy Montana Kids program is bound to be one of the enduring hot-button issues as the 2009 Legislature unfolds in the next two months.

We'll get back to their reasons in a moment, but first, a short review of what happened last week in a budget subcommittee that oversees the program's budget.

Healthy Montana Kids, you'll recall, is the new program that Montana voters approved last November when they overwhelmingly approved Initiative 155.

I-155 expands eligibility for two established government-funded insurance programs, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), to cover about 30,000 lower-income Montana kids who are now without insurance.

Yet while voters approved I-155, they didn't approve the funding to pay for it, because a ballot measure cannot appropriate money. That job is left to the Legislature.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer, a Democrat, has said funding Healthy Montana Kids and getting it going this year is a top priority for his administration — although initially he wasn't the most enthusiastic supporter of I-155.

Last week, legislative budget subcommittees finished up their recommendations for the 2010-11 state budget, which begins in July.

Lewis, a member of the Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services, said Wednesday he wanted to delay the start of Healthy Montana Kids for two years, because the state couldn't afford its \$35 million price tag for the next two years.

He said if the subcommittee approved the \$35 million, it would have to cut that much from somewhere else in the human-service budget, and he didn't want to do that.

Democrats on the panel moved to approve the funding, but that motion failed on a 4-4 vote, with all Republicans on the panel, including Lewis, voting against it.

Two days later, Republican Rep. Penny Morgan, R-Billings, offered a compromise of expanding CHIP this year to cover another 15,000 kids. Democrats said no, and that they would support only the full expansion of Healthy Montana Kids in I-155.

Let's be clear about one thing: Last week's votes are far from the last word on the subject. The state budget bill has many steps remaining in the House and Senate and funding for Healthy Montana Kids can be added, subtracted or amended in many ways.

We also have federal economic-stimulus money coming down the pike, which is another unknown factor in sorting out the human-service budget for the next two years.

Lewis insists he's simply worried about balancing the state budget, and that he'd prefer not to start a new,

expanded program like Healthy Montana Kids when it would mean chopping other existing programs in the Department of Public Health and Human Services.

It's also worth noting that many in the Montana Republican Party have never liked CHIP, even though it's politically popular. They see it as more socialization of health care, with its government provision of insurance, and note that Healthy Montana Kids would add up to 60 new bureaucrats to oversee the expansion.

Yet it's hard to see why they'd draw this line in the sand, since 70 percent of Montanans voted for the expansion. Also, expanding CHIP and Medicaid under Healthy Montana Kids means an additional \$70 million in matching health funds from the federal government — a huge injection of cash into the state economy.

It's possible that funding for Healthy Montana Kids is just a bargaining chip as the budget debate unfolds this session. The expansion can't be delayed without changing the law, and that takes at least one Democratic vote, since the House is tied 50-50. And it can't be funded without some Republican votes, since Republicans also control the Senate.

Again, Lewis says he's just concerned about the health of the state budget: "Given the circumstances, where else do I go to get \$35 million? It was the only place I could have taken a stand and had an impact (on the budget)."